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From co-located to dispersed work – first experiences of commuter hubs as stress intervention

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The headquarters of the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) is in Westminster within London, UK. The cost of property within this location is much higher than elsewhere in the country and the department has sought multiple ways of reducing these costs. Rising housing prices compared to income also meant that employees increasingly located in towns and cities with more affordable houses. However, moving out of London created a new situation where employees spend more time on commuting to the London office and well-being surveys pointed at this as a core reason for the many frustrations.

In 2014, MoJ developed a commuter hub concept. The aim of the concept was i) improve worklife balance for staff by reducing the amount of commuting and ii) to facilitate a reduction in demand for expensive office space within central London. A commuter hub makes use of existing regional properties, is an official workplace placed closer to where people live and offers the facilities that staff expect in their main office. The office space is typically open and consists of bookable staff desks. Since the start, MoJ have established close to 50 hubs from Brighton to York and plans for more hubs.

The MoJ initiative, establishing new office hubs, can be considered as a primary intervention, where the whole organization focuses on reducing the stressors - in this case frustrations over time wasted. This project aims to study the development and intervention process of the commuter hubs, where an organization is the target, and to evaluate the effects. The main part of the project is expected to start in 2019; however, this paper presents the findings from a small pilot study carried out in January 2018.

Method:

To gain initial insight and understanding of the development and intervention process, the pilot study applied focus group (FG) interview based on a semi-structured interview guide in combination with secondary data i.e MoJ process documents and blogs. Three people participated in the FG interview and acted in their role as programme manager, Commuter Hub leader and facilitator. The FG interview themes were i) the drivers of the preventive change (commuter hubs) and expected outcomes, ii) the implementation process and finally iii) the participants' experiences of the process and change.

Analysis and results:

Applying a template analysis, there are a number of points worth noting. First, the drivers for establishing the commuter hubs were clear; to reduce stressful time wasted on commuting and reduce the high rent for MoJ. Second, the commuter hubs resulted in reduced frustrations as the employees spend less time commuting and gave them a choice and more flexibility, and consequently more time with the families striking a good work/life balance. Finally, increased proximity/closeness to home resulted in more dispersed work and colleagues and consequently, the daily on-site management was changed into distance management, which required new ways of

working and managerial behavior. The FG interview only provided limited insight into the process, which will one of the focus points in the project starting in 2019.